

“Experimental Television / Educational Television / New Media”

Peer Bode

‘Ralph I. Hocking Work 1969 to 1986’ DVD 2004

In 2004 Ralph Hocking with the assistance of Joo Mee Paik and the Institute for Electronic Arts at Alfred University produced a DVD of video recordings called “Ralph I. Hocking Work 1969 to 1986” These are some thoughts regarding Ralph Hocking, his work, his ideas and present contexts.

What is experimental television? Ask the director of the Experimental Television Center, Ralph Hocking. For more than 30 years, he together with Sherry Miller and a band of artists and engineers, have continued to experiment, engaging in concrete electronic activities, physicalized signals and breathing with electronics. The challenge has been interacting with multiple electronic bodies, processes, systems, synthesizers of many sorts, ideas, unknown visual and sound forms, pre genre forms, real time systems, complex systems, primitive systems, observational systems, interactive systems and immersive systems.

Ralph Hocking’s work has focused on real time dialogues and inter actions within electronically created and controlled signals.

Video recordings of multiple channels of monitoring and observing -

1. an observer observing another observer in the space of the electronic processes.
2. the observed observer observing the sound and image inter-action space on the image and sound monitors and then reacting.

These works are complex electronic observations, voyeurisms, feedbacks and actions. The sculptor, photographer, video, media maker with six simultaneous live cameras, looking and dialoguing across numerous systems of understanding. Dialoguing with Sherry Miller, his collaborator, observer and performer. Photography, film, video, computer meditations, image, sound, signals and bodies, these are another set of terms for understanding. Reclaiming the visual and sound space from the laws of the textual terrain and terms of argument. His is a personal need to delete the text, substituting the eye, the hand, and the mind complex, a curiosity, a desire and thinking. First there is television then there is experimental television, the venom’s antidote.

Stressing the physical materials, the real time moments, the flows and the events these are multiple bodies within the networks of basic video spaces. The recordings made are investigations, curiosities and constructions. One thinks of Donald Judd and his object/image thresholds.

Ralph Hocking’s strategies involve using experimental electronic artist tools, industrial tools, scientific tools, and surplus tools/ machines. His is a practice that is strident,

focused and committed to art and life. His interest is in embodiment, in signal substance, temporality, rhythm, frequency and feedback. Personally struggling under the historical tyrannies of film, drama and prose fiction, his electronic work has clear connections to the process based anti illusionistic cinemas emerging out of the 60's and 70's. I am thinking of Paul Sharits, Hollis Frampton, Tony Conrad, the Woody and Steina Vasulka, Larry Gottheim, Ken Jacobs, Peter Kubelka, Takahiko Iimura, Michael Snow and of course Nam June Paik. Ralph Hocking's work has been sculpture, ceramics, photography, video, and computer. Not afraid of machines he is a video tool/ instrument activist, designer and tinkerer, committed to video synthesizers, collecting them, inventing them, building them, using them, exploring them with his collaborators Sherry Miller and electronic system designer David Jones. His work has a surprising electronic sensuality, the glow, the warm buzz of the electronic signals. Television has never been the same. His is a discovering and responding to electronic codings, transformations and delivery processes. Rich and chaotic and then also simplified, clarified and intensified. His are wonderfully modulated and articulated video fields. These works are also rich culture shifts, breaking in, modifying and rewiring the powers of culture, sidestepping, ignoring the dominant media mythologies to again look and hear the images, the sounds, the actions and the signal materials. This is a cultural project. His are signals and eroticisms, hot signals materialized, physicalized, breaking open the boxes. At moments we have breath taking situational and sensual signals. Hocking's strategy is to not play the games and discourses of dominant television or the movies, always critical of and selectively by-passing the operations of the reigning economy of television. His is a maneuvering through and constructing within capitalistic space and time, within late capitalism. Always aware of the politics of materials, processes and access. Aware and avoiding fake properness. His is the direct interaction with the performative and representation, flushed out with real bodies in the bodies of real time analog signals and digital subroutines and digital memory buffers.

Where does this all take place? Ralph Hocking, committed to materials and the senses makes the spaces and times of contemporary private and public embodied in the work, in the images and sounds. He is creating new media languages. He is also fighting a personal battle with the escalating power of theory. As an artist working within and outside the academy for over 30 years, his media work is made with an awareness of the flood of discourses and texts concerning photographic images, cinema seeing, apparatuses, representation, objectification, etc. The 60's and 70's were a cultural moment when theory, so it thought, could displace art as the vanguard activity. Or a bit later the attempt to totally eliminate art except in propagandistic and agitational forms. Or now to eliminate art except in capitalistic and advertising forms, this paralleling the flood of mass industrial Madison Avenue and Hollywood media products. Making media artwork is to work within all these contradictions. The theory and practice tensions continue. Electronic media arts curating and distribution is challenging. Yet works continues to be made. The authority of textual discourses were and continue to be breathtaking. Fortunately Ralph Hocking's aboveground and underground electronic art practices continue unabated.

What are the electronic cinema processes not squeezed by the commercial, the industrial, by the narrative and the entertaining? What is the result of visual sound investigations, experiments, systems, examinations and essays? It is an embodied critique, a radical cultural critique. Not just surface skimming but learning, changing, inventing and experimenting. To play in this space is to co-exist with many orders, all the time maneuvering within challenging economic and ideological constraints.

New cinema? There is the long history of cinema's aggressive arguments and attitudes. Video ("the evil blue light"- Stan Brakhage) in its electronic potentials including digital and computer potentials is reinventing the history and life of the cinema, the moving image. Ralph Hocking's works in the visual and sound arts are these electronic dialogues, electronic embodiments and amplifications.

As Picabia said in "Entr'acte", " If you are not satisfied, go to hell."

Ralph Hocking, if you know him, you know he is a critic, a debater and a builder. He is a combative sensualist. His commitments have not been in the commercial spectacle but rather a site of seeking, of unexplored possibilities, of othernesses, suggesting that radical notion of alternative futures. What do our tools, our technologies think? Or what thinking is embodied in our tools and technologies? Ralph Hocking is one of a community of artists, thinkers and agitators. His work continues to contribute to the ground works for future researches. With his studio practices, his recordings, with his photographs and with his Experimental Television Center he has created long and deep collaborations with many artists and engineers. Television has never been the same.

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We know, those of us who live in America on the ground, that we live in the environment of an enforced amnesia driven by advanced consumer culture. Thinking is hard to do, sometimes impossible. What do we have? We are surrounded by institutional discourses, management discourses, advert discourses, disciplinary discourses. Michel Foucault says in a memorable passage also referred to by Edward Said, that prisons are factories for producing delinquency and delinquency is the raw material for disciplinary discourses. Question: what are the prisons we all participate in, in contemporary tele-cultural discourses? What are the disciplinary discourses of imagistic commerce? What is art and media in a present conservative American time and in a global world that is moving ahead, with or without America? As practitioners, we know there are many inadequacies in our independent media histories. There are also many inadequacies to how we use the histories that we have.

As in Hamid Naficy's references to a "marked cinema and an accented cinema", a cinema clearly separate from and marking the Hollywood style, Ralph Hocking's media work is a marked media and an accented media. This one is called experimental television. What is experimental television? Experimental television is related to educational television. Whatever happened to educational television? What happened to its mission when it became "Public Television"? That is a problem. The good news is that experimental television has not gone away. It is part of the culture of new media now that

continues to be working in the many curious and challenging collaborations between artists, activists, software and hardware engineers and writers and thinkers. Interestingly, at the 1998 Upstate New York conference, “Video History: Making Connections” Steina Vasulka shared that the first decade of video/ media artists was marked by “activities and collaborations between the gallery artists, the political activist artists and the image processor artists”. The next generations of those orientations are still in dialogue and more should be encouraged.

Floating in a sea of narrative debris. What is our nourishing food for thought? How much do we carry in our heads that are lines from bad novels, made into Hollywood style and TV News style information? Are we protecting and reinforcing questionable borders and categories or are we willing as media artists to imagine new/next borders and categories? Are we automatically repeating assimilated business models, management models? Or are we pushing our selves and each other to maneuver through “open systems” that dialogue in multiple, heterogeneous models?

Francis Bacon in the early 1600’s suggested “experimentalisms”: empirical methods. Four hundred years later, theory and practice, ideas and the empirical, prove to be powerful methodologies. These now might be thought of as “democracy exercises”, a revival of the idea of civic duty, public service and public experiments in a new space of international visibility. What we are seeing is media artists engaged in multiple discourses of reinterpretation in discourses networks that are transnational in their reach.

We know that industrial culture meets industrial culture. We also know that independent media culture/ personal media culture meets industrial culture. “Other Practices” meets Hollywood/ Madison Ave. The international art cinema traditions, new media activities with their meta-level reflections on art and authenticity, effective information, innovation, consciousness and psychic structures continue to flourish.

There are many unresolved issues and debates around trans national media, cinema, experimental film and new media etc.. There are many incomplete projects. There are many suggestions latent in electronic culture: underground and hardcore(extreme) and minor cinemas and other cinemas and transnational cinemas... We need to acknowledge and share the successes of the many individuals and communities involved.

Nam June Paik wrote humorously and challengingly about “ make electronic sex”. He also wrote with vision that ”every cable television station in the world should have one public art channel (MTV is a kind of art channel, but I like unpopular art)”. Global public art channels, how is it getting done, this global experimental television, educational and art television?

Here is a gift given to me. I happily pass it on to you. Down load and explore “Blender”, an ‘open source’ and free 3d modeling and animation program, Mac or PC. Go rot90, text mappings, transformations, and solid cube with delay, active objects, and Meta

objects, get selected, meshes, fields, set smooth. This is good warming up and body building,

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Like the electronic media composer Robert Ashley, Ralph Hocking is a product of the American Mid West. "Make your own". As Dr. Tom Rhea has suggested, the cultural reasoning to add voltage control to the modular Moog Synthesizer in the 60's was "to be independent, to make your own music (American) vs. work through the realizer, the other technical team (European). "Yvonne Rainer recently observed with some concern , "the definition of 'independent' is a film that opens in less than 500 theaters". Let us though not forget that Independent Cinema and Media is a tradition to be reclaimed and that it also means and is permission to "make your own". Ralph Hocking has brought the independent ethic and embodied electronic practices to contemporary experimental television and to new media. We have much to be grateful to him for. His work is hard to ignore. We are fortunate now to have his work on DVD.

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